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Septic Operation and Maintenance in Marine Counties—Survey of Current Practices

Washington State Board of Health
October 6, 2004

BEST MANAGEMENT PRACTICES FROM LOCAL HEALTH REGARDING O&M FOR ONSITE SEWAGE SYSTEMS

Introduction

In preparation for the continued discussion onsite sewage system monitoring and maintenance at the October 2004 State BOH meeting, Assistant Secretary of Health, Janice Adair asked local environmental health directors to provide examples of best management practices for monitoring and maintenance. The following statements summarize the examples submitted to Department of Health.

King

Public Health - Seattle and King County (PHSKC) began its Operation and Maintenance (O&M) program in 1999 and continues to implement its goals to protect public health from sewage spills, prevent groundwater contamination, reduce the number of costly failures, and extend the life of onsite sewage (septic) systems.

- O&M program largely educational.
- Onsite septic kits to new owners.
- Copy of as-built to homeowner of systems 1-3 years old.
- Workshops, training for realtors, articles in publications, website materials (8000 hits per month).
- Bringing all the known onsite systems in the county into a database. The database will be able to access scanned images of the key documents.
- Local rules have maintenance requirements but rely on education and voluntary compliance.
- The O&M Program licenses professionals to conduct periodic monitoring and submit monitoring report forms to PHSKC.

Kitsap

The KCHD is responsible for administering the O&M program within its jurisdictional boundaries. As part of this responsibility they oversee the performance of private industry (certified O&M specialists) completing the required operation, monitoring and maintenance of all alternative systems in the county and providing annual maintenance reports to KCHD.

- Educational efforts are through the builder, the onsite sewage industry and the realtors.
- Standard gravity systems – O&M by system owner.
- All other systems – O&M must be done by certified O&M provider, by contract between owner and O&M provider.
- O&M provider submits annual maintenance reports to KCHD and is charged a \$25 fee for the submittal. This fee is included in the contract with the system owner and therefore is not perceived as a permit fee to the homeowner, and yet provides partial funding for the program.
- More than 3100 contracts on file with KCHD.
- KCHD has a new computerized system for tracking the inventory of onsite systems in the County. Nearly all systems for which there are any records are entered into the system.

Klickitat

The failure rate there is low and O&M information is provided with every permit issued. They also run radio ads on septic maintenance, additives, etc. and the director usually talks about septic issues when he is on the talk show every month or so.

- Program is strictly educational and will remain so.
- A mandated prescriptive program will not be accepted in this county.

Lincoln

After the completion of our final inspection, a complete as built diagram is sent to the homeowner along with educational material specific to their system for operation and maintenance. They have videos available free of charge upon request. They put advertisements in all three community newspapers reminding homeowners to have their tanks and system reviewed and pumped if needed. In this community, they feel that this is adequate.

- 2-3 repairs a year out of 70-100 permits per year.
- Repairs tend to be to old systems, installed prior to 1975, with steel septic tanks, with seepage pits, or worse.
- No resources, need or desire for a mandated prescriptive O&M program.

NE Tri-County Health District

Their program is strictly educational: video and information on maintenance is sent out with every permit issued; for alternative systems, O&M manuals from designers are reviewed before the permits are issued. They co-sponsor meetings with realtors, homeowners and WSU Extension. The staff at the department think this is adequate.

- Educational only – it is enough.
- O&M requirements should be flexible to allow LHJ to address local issues rather than state mandated.
- Concerned that won't get the new state regulation adopted locally because of detailed and demanding O&M requirements.

Pacific

Pacific County does not mandate ongoing O&M for existing septic systems except those alternative and experimental systems mandated to complete O&M as per permit approval. The county feels the following program is sufficient and works well:

At time of sale of property

- A thorough system inspection by a county-trained and approved private O&M specialist.
- Septic tanks pumped and inspected, drainfields exposed and inspected, pumps and controls tested.
- O&M specialist must oversee the pumping.
- A detailed inspection report is submitted to the county, which is checked against a list of property transactions recorded in the Auditor's office.
- 50 sales/inspections per month
- Have caught a number of failing systems and quite a few that were improved by maintenance and adjustment.

Skagit

The O/M program in Skagit has worked to date because it was built slowly and carefully, making certain they had support of the on site professional community as well as the political leaders here. They have taken the educational approach: the Tabloid publication, the Septics 101 and 201 classes, regular meetings with O/M professionals and the real estate community. The Septics 101 classes have had 999 attendees in the 3½ years.

- Focus in marine communities because of attention to shellfish closures.
- Success in marine communities where there are expensive homes without a sewer option.
- Less successful where antagonists are active and vocal.
- What works for wet Skagit County cannot and should not apply in Eastern Washington counties.
- Regular O/M inspections, just like regular oil changes for a car, go a long way toward catching and mitigating the damage.
- They need some long-term funding behind it.

Spokane

Our O&M program in Spokane consists of renewable permits. When the 1995 regulation added the requirement for an O&M program, they convened an advisory committee made up of the industry, community partners, and the public, to look at what level of O&M was necessary in Spokane County based on local conditions. The district already had renewable permit requirements over the Aquifer and it was the committee's decision to extend it Countywide.

- 53,000 onsite systems.
- Renewable permits for all onsite systems. Residential permits: 3 years.
- Inspect and pump tank, as necessary, before renewal of permit.

Tacoma-Pierce

Onsite sewage systems are registered into the O&M program whenever there is a permit request and at time of transfer of title. Systems are classified into 3 risk categories: high, medium and low.

- High-risk systems must renew the permit every year, medium risk every 3 years and low risk systems have no renewal requirements (function and maintenance is assured at time of title transfer).
- Prior to transfer of title, owners of all properties with an OSS in use must obtain a Report of System Status (RSS) from the TPCHD. A RSS requires system registration (if not already registered), an inspection and pumping as necessary by a private-sector service company, and a follow-up inspection by TPCHD staff.
- TPCHD currently performs approximately 5,000 RSS inspections annually. Approximately 16 percent of the systems inspected have some "issue" that needs correction or that the owner needs to be made aware of Best Management Practices. For example, repair or replacement of lids, baffles, etc. or advice to discontinue parking in the drainfield area, etc. More than half of the inspection / pumping reports indicate the septic tank was overdue for pumping.
- All O&M Service Providers and Pumpers are required to be certified by TPCHD. Certification includes testing and annual continuing education requirements.

- Targeted education (e.g. public information meetings, workshops, mailings) to systems in the high-risk category.
- Eventually expect to have nearly all onsite systems registered; high-risk systems being actively sought.
- Archived projects being converted to digital images that are accessible from a database.

Thurston

We've been dealing with O&M for a while with varied levels of success. The things that seem to work the best for them are below:

- Septic help line - There is no charge for this service. Often the problems are easy to identify and repair.
- Workshops – They conduct 6-8 free septic system workshops per year. Main topics covered are the basics of system function and what folks can do to monitor and maintain their systems.
- Mandatory sanitary survey programs - Current survey programs rely on voluntary participation and the use of probable cause to get warrants when folks don't participate. The result is much more time intensive and has lower participation rates. If the Board or legislature created a system where sanctioned neighborhood surveys could occur, it would help address marine and shoreline problems.
- Dedicated enforcement staff – They follow up on complaints and assure that failing systems are repaired. This program resolves 95 % of the complaints and failures within one year.
- Electronic tracking system - A system is in place to track septic system and O&M permits. The electronic database captures valuable information and helps the department send reminders, track maintenance activities, etc.

Walla Walla

The annual septic system failure rate is only about 2%. Staff provide education with every septic permit issued. (A video and two handouts - one on maintenance and one re: septic additives) Periodically, there is an article in the local paper regarding maintenance, etc.

- Program strictly educational.
- They do not have the funds nor the time to perform additional activities including developing a written plan for O&M for all onsite sewage systems in the jurisdiction.

Yakima

They (anecdotally) find very few on-site system repairs that would have been prevented from maintenance. The systems were old, having reached the end of their functional life. Others had been damaged (driven/built over), the occupancy design was exceeded, or the systems were flood irrigated.

- From the Yakima perspective, developing an O&M program is not cost effective.
- A statewide mandated O&M program is not required there and would meet great resistance.